

Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

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September 18, 2005
18th Sunday after Pentecost
Matthew 20:1-16
Pastor Beck Goldbeck

First Lesson: Isaiah 55:6-9
Psalm of the Day: Psalm 27
Second Lesson: Philippians 1:18b-27
Gospel: Matthew 20:1-16

It's Not Fair

It's not fair. It's not fair. Have you ever heard anybody say that? Have you said it yourself? Sometimes that is a valid complaint, isn't it—it's not fair? Think of African American men who were great baseball players in the 1920s and 1930s and 1940s. It wasn't until 1947 that they were permitted to play in the major leagues. They missed out on the fame and fortune. Somebody said bigotry handed them a one-way ticket to obscurity. It has been over a half century since Lou Gehrig and Babe Ruth died, but we still have Babe Ruth league baseball for kids and we talk about the disease he died from as Lou Gehrig's Disease. But you haven't heard much about Cool Papa Bell or Josh Gibson. It's just not fair, is it? It shouldn't have been that way.

But sometimes when somebody says, "It's not fair", it's just so much whining, isn't it? Parents who have more than one child know something about that, don't you? Christmas comes and you spend exactly the same amount on each child and the presents are there, but one child gets one present more even though the amount of money was the same. They say, "It's not fair, mom, dad. They got a present I didn't get." Or the older child gets to stay up a little later and watch more television at night. The younger child says, "It's not fair. She gets to stay up and I don't."

Aren't there adults like that too? They think they have to have everything that everyone else has and if they don't have it, even though they didn't work for it or they didn't have the talent or whatever, they say, "It's not fair". And you say, "Quit whining. Life's not fair."

Today this text addresses that issue of fairness about God's dealing with other people and with us. But then you also consider that subject, "It's not fair" and we see on the one hand it is an attitude that we want to let go of. On the other hand, it is an attitude that we want to hold on to. It's not fair—an attitude we want to let go of.

To understand why Jesus told this parable, you have to back up to the previous chapter. He didn't just tell this parable out of nowhere to the disciples. There had been an incident. A man had come to Jesus and he was very wealthy. There is nothing wrong with that, but he put his trust in his wealth above God. That is where he found his confidence, his assurance. So Jesus said, "Sell everything you've got and follow me." The Apostle Peter got to thinking about this and after the man had gone, he said to Jesus, "What will we get because we have left everything to follow you?" That was true. Peter and Andrew were fishing that one day and they dropped their nets and left their boats behind and followed Jesus and left their homes. Matthew was sitting at the tax

collector's booth. Jesus said, "Follow me." And he left his work and followed Jesus. James and John left their father in the fishing boat and they followed Jesus. Peter looks at him and says, "What are we going to get out of this? What is there for us?" "There will be something there" Jesus says. There will be the beauty of heaven for the Apostles. But he wants to make it clear to them and us that when they get there, it won't be because of anything they have left or done for Jesus. And so he tells this parable.

Today, so we can understand this parable, we have to talk about a work day because today there is somebody who maybe works the graveyard shift—they go in at 10:30 or 11:00 at night and work through the night. Some people start at 7:00 in the morning and quit in the middle of the afternoon. Other people start later in the morning and quit in the early evening. But in those days, everybody worked from sunup to sundown—6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.

Here is a man who had a vineyard and the work was urgent. It doesn't tell us exactly what was happening—probably harvest. Grapes have to be picked at just the right time. He needs workers. At 6:00 a.m., he goes and gets workers. He repeats this process at 9:00 a.m. He goes again at noon. And he goes at 3:00 p.m. Finally, one hour before quitting time, at 5:00 p.m., he goes and gets more men to work for him. When you hear that he hired those people at five different times, you would probably say, there's the difference—when they went to work. But if you listen closely to the text, you will see there is another difference. The difference is the attitude into which they went to that work.

Listen to the first one. *He agreed to pay them a denarius.* They wanted an arrangement. They wanted a contract. They wanted to say, "Okay. You are the landowner. Here is what we are going to do. Now what are you going to do for us? We want to get paid. We want a pay that is commensurate with what we are doing." They wanted to negotiate.

Listen to the other hires. When he went out, he says, "*go and work...I will pay you whatever is right*". And finally at the end he says, "Just get to work. Go out in my vineyard." No negotiation, no contract, no "you do this and I'll do that". You see, nobody deserves a job, do they? You can't walk into some place and say, "You must hire me. I deserve to be hired." Getting a job is something that you don't deserve. And those people who are disgruntled at the end, they heard the Donald Trump line, right? "You're fired! Take what you got out of this and get out of here. You are no longer associated with me."

Remember that this is in response to a question—"What is in it for us who have given up everything for you?" Jesus' response is that whatever is in it, it is simply grace. That is—God's undeserved love. Something that is never merited—you don't have any leverage with God. You can't negotiate with him. You can't make a contract with him. It is entirely his generosity. Think about that verse in Romans that says—while we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Powerless and ungodly—we have nothing to offer him. The famous grace passage—by grace you are saved through faith—this is not from yourselves, it is a gift of God so that nobody can boast.

Jesus tells this parable to Apostles because even those who are part of Jesus' family, part of his work force, can start to think "works" instead of "grace". They can start to look at what others have done and what they have done and think that in some way and in some measure, at least in a little bit of a way, God owes them something. And Jesus says it is all grace.

Doesn't this picture also depict somewhat what it is like in the work of the church? As you go around the different congregations, you will find that there is one problem that seems to be universal. That is—the limited number of people who get involved in doing the work. There is plenty of work just like there were plenty of grapes to be picked. It's urgent work, but it seems hard to get people involved. People will come up with little sayings. Perhaps you have heard them, like—10% of the people do 90% of the work in the congregation. The church is full of willing people—some willing to work, the others willing to let them.

This is not an excuse for not getting involved. This is not to say it is okay to sit back on the sideline and say, "Let other people do the Lord's work." But those who are doing it have to watch out. Watch out so that they don't think that what they are doing is somehow making them closer to God. That what they are doing is making them acceptable to God and somehow they are going to get to heaven—those other people might not because they haven't pitched in.

Maybe it is not fair in a sense when few people do most of the work, but what you should concentrate on is this—thank God that he gave you his Son and forgiveness, that he gave you the building to do the work, that he gave you the time to do it—and get to work. Otherwise you take the joy out of serving the Lord. It's not fair. That's an attitude to let go of.

Think about God's generosity—how do we view it? How do we view God's generosity? Remember a number of years ago—I am sure those of us who are old enough do—Jeffrey Dahmer? You know how he murdered, viciously, 17 people and did other things that we don't need to talk about—vile things. He went to prison. There somebody killed him. But before that happened, he was interviewed and he claimed that his sins were covered by the blood of Christ. He claimed that he trusted in Jesus Christ. We can't look in his heart. We don't know where he is today, but we do know that he said that. About that possibility of him being forgiven and him being in heaven right now, here is what one man wrote.

Dahmer is said to have made his peace with his maker. Lucky for him, we have different makers. I think mine requires a little more than a prison conversion and a dunk in the whirlpool to make up for butchering about a dozen and a half people. Are we supposed to believe God embraces the murderer and sends the victims to hell? Not in any heaven I want to be a part of.

Doesn't that sound like the people who were hired first in the day? "It's not fair. Look what he did. He shouldn't get what we get. God can't be that generous." But he is. And before we say he shouldn't be that generous with somebody, the man who wrote

these words should think about that passage in 1 John when he is talking about murderers—anyone who hates his brother is a murderer—and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him. God is a very generous God—a God of grace, of undeserved love—a God who is generous in Christ—a God who doesn't expect us to earn it because we can't, but a God who gives it to us. It's not fair. But when we look at God's generosity towards all people, we have to let go of that attitude that it's not fair. When we look at ourselves, we had better remember—it's not fair.

What if God gave us exactly what we deserve? What if God gave you and me precisely what we deserve from him? If you are a child, you know what God says, right? Honor, serve, and obey them and give them love and respect—whoever is in authority—parents, teachers, adults who are placed over you. If you disobey or take a bad attitude, it's a sin. The bible says that the eye who mocks his father, scorns obedience to his mother, the ravens of the valley shall pick it out and young eagles shall eat it. That's saying you deserve to be punished.

How about us as adults? Did you ever say something and you wish you could just suck those words right back in and that you could take them back because you spoke out of anger or you spoke rashly without knowing the facts and made accusations that weren't true. You want to take those words back, but you can't. Not only that, Jesus says that on the Day of Judgment, men must give an account for every idle word they have spoken. How are we going to give an account to a Holy, Holy, Holy God about something like that?

Then maybe we look around and say, "Well, I sure haven't done the things that some other people have done." And maybe we haven't. But look at it this way—if you were to take a baseball in your hand and throw it as hard as you could against a window on somebody's house, the window is broken, you are responsible and you have to pay for it. If you carried a whole bucket of baseballs over into your neighbor's yard and you started throwing them until that bucket was empty, you would have a lot more baseballs that you threw, but you would still have one window that is broken, and you are responsible. Now that is not to say—go ahead and sin as much as you want. But the point is that the bible says—whoever keeps the whole law and offends in one point is guilty of all. You are still guilty.

So you could say that grace is not fair. You could be an oil sheik and you couldn't buy it. You could be the most intelligent person in the world and you can't figure it out. You could be the most attractive person in the world and you can't win it. You could live the longest life known in history and you won't get it for that either. But it's there. It's called grace—undeserved love. The Psalm 103 says, "*as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.*" It's a well-known verse. Perhaps we should also remember another verse from that Psalm that speaks about why God did that. It says, "*he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities.*" He doesn't treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. Instead, in a move of unfairness, he puts his Son in our place. And he puts every breaking of God's windows, every disobedience by a child, every misspoken word, on the back of Jesus Christ and he washes them away with his blood right there on the cross. Even the criminal dying next to Jesus recognized that it wasn't fair. He

said, “We deserve what we are getting. This man has done nothing wrong.” That’s what grace is—love, forgiveness, eternal life that we don’t deserve, but God is generous enough to give. And not just to us, but to all.

There is a hymn verse that captured that very well. That God’s thinking is not our thinking when it comes to grace. It says:

What punishment so strange is suffered yonder. The shepherd dies for sheep that love to wander. The master pays the debt his servants owe him. Who would not know him.

Who wouldn’t know him by this, because this is not the human way of doing things, this is God’s way of doing things. God had to punish our sin because justice demanded it. He did it in Christ. It wasn’t fair that the sinless Son of God had to do it, but it was grace—his grace for us as sinners. And because of it, we stand forgiven before the Heavenly Father.

When it comes to our relationship with God, it is a good attitude to hang on to—it’s not fair. It’s a good attitude because it reflects a humility that recognizes that we are sinners and deserve nothing but damnation. It is a good attitude because it recognizes that Christ humbled himself and became obedient unto death on the cross for us, for our forgiveness, for our eternal life.

When it comes to looking around at other people in the congregation and in the world, let’s let go of that attitude that it’s not fair. We are all in the same boat. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. Let’s not resent God’s grace to other people, just as we don’t resent it to ourselves.

God is extremely generous in an unreal way. Parables reflect everyday life. This parable has an unreal aspect to it in the generosity of the man who owned the vineyard, and that is the generosity of our God, our Savior, Jesus Christ. IT’S NOT FAIR. IT’S GRACE.